

WORDS COUNT

**Effective Vocabulary
Instruction in Action**

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**HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH**

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greenwood, Scott C.

Words count : effective vocabulary instruction in action / Scott C. Greenwood.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-325-00648-2

1. Vocabulary—Study and teaching (Elementary). 2. Language arts (Elementary). I. Title.

LB1574.5.G74 2004

372.44—dc22

2003026567

Editor: Lois Bridges

Production: Lynne Reed

Cover design: Suzanne Heiser, Night & Day Design

Typesetter: Gina Poirier

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

08 07 06 05 04 VP 1 2 3 4 5

Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>v</i>
1 How Not to Teach Vocabulary	1
2 What Works: Principles of Sound Vocabulary Instruction	8
3 Vocabulary and Oral Language	20
4 Teaching Vocabulary in Connection with Literature	29
5 Teaching Vocabulary in Connection with Curriculum	52
6 Teaching Vocabulary in Connection with Writing	71
7 Structural Analysis and Word Parts	88
8 Using Dictionaries and Other Reference Tools	100
9 Vocabulary Lite	109
10 Assessing Vocabulary	136
<i>Postscript</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>194</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>200</i>

To Sara Rao

*A wise mentor and a brave fighter
You've strongly influenced many children — and me*

For Nathaniel and Alex, now six and four years old.

*May this book generate some royalties
to defray those future tuition bills. . . .*

Acknowledgments (and Random Musings)

I remember reading *Robinson Crusoe* when I was about ten years old—it was an abridged version with lots of pictures. I marveled at the title character’s adventures, at his ability to survive. I must’ve reread it four or five times. I remember the rescue of “Friday,” as well as Robinson Crusoe’s eventual rescue.

I also remember the folly of his first attempt at boat building: he felled a large tree, spent many hours of arduous labor digging/scraping out a hull—and *then* realized that it was way too big and heavy for him to move it to the water. All of those hours pretty much for naught, but a lesson learned. And a metaphor for some of my work on this, my second Heinemann book. Here were my blunders:

- I forgot that Heinemann uses *Chicago* style—I collected all my references in APA and ended up having to go back and find first names of many authors and editors. Tedious.
- I found out why many writers pay another person a fee to do their index! What a chore.
- I agreed to deliver the completed manuscript at the same time I was teaching nine credits. Very unwise!

There are some people who absolutely need to be recognized for their help and contributions:

- Jennifer Joiner has been incredibly efficient and diligent in typing, formatting, and providing feedback. She consistently made herself available at “crunch time.” Without her support, this book would never have been written.
- Susan Quigley, Stacey Fisher, Chuck Menas, and Carey Little were particularly generous about opening up their classrooms and sharing their

Acknowledgments

students. I was able to “play with” their kids and tweak activities. Susan, additionally, was a great help with collecting permissions.

- Bob Clegg, principal of West Bradford Elementary School, has been a congenial host to me and my West Chester University reading practicum students. The doors to his school are always open, and the ongoing staff development (formal and informal) opportunities have been good for the teachers, the students, Bob, and me.
- My graduate students at West Chester University have gone back to their classrooms and tried out many of these strategies plus offshoots and permutations. My colleagues at WCU have also been supportive—and at times sympathetic!
- Copy editor Alan Huisman tightened up and enhanced my work with aplomb. Lynne Reed pulled things together professionally, competently.
- Finally, Lois Bridges is absolutely kind, competent, and considerate—her editorial expertise is deeply appreciated.

I have always loved words. To *write* about words, to pass on (to teachers and teachers of teachers) what I’ve learned over the years, is both a pleasure and an awesome responsibility.

1

How Not to Teach Vocabulary

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

The students in Mrs. Morgan's fifth-grade classroom are all reading *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. It is Monday, vocabulary day. Mrs. M has chosen thirty words for the week for the children to learn, pulling them from the chapters they will be reading on Tuesday through Friday. The required words are neatly typed and alphabetized. The kids dutifully set about the chore of looking up the definitions; Mrs. M. stops them periodically to clarify and problem-solve. And there are lots of problems to solve. Although Mrs. M. has identified the page number and the chapter where the words are found, the children seem intent on getting the job done quickly, rushing to get it over with. By the end of the hour, the kids all have thirty definitions. Their homework assignment is to use the thirty words in original sentences. Tuesday they'll get to read.

When I talk to Mrs. M. over coffee during her prep period, I ask her how the vocabulary work is going. She says the children are well behaved and are working hard and admits that she is working hard, too, but that the work seems to have very little impact on either reading comprehension or written communication. She says she has been doing vocabulary this way for years, the only change being to increase the number of words to try to bolster standardized test scores. She says, "I know vocabulary is important. I keep working at it, but the time and energy I'm spending just don't seem to be paying off. There just has to be a better way."

Most teachers, whether because their school requires them to or because they know it's important, focus time and effort on vocabulary work so that children are exposed to rich, varied language. Yes, increasing high-stakes testing pressures are a

factor, but most teachers have goals that are larger and more altruistic than raising test scores. Despite an increasing body of evidence about what constitutes best practice, the fact remains that good vocabulary teaching and learning remain elusive. According to Baumann and Kameenui (1991), “We know too much to say we know too little, and we know too little to say that we know enough” (604).

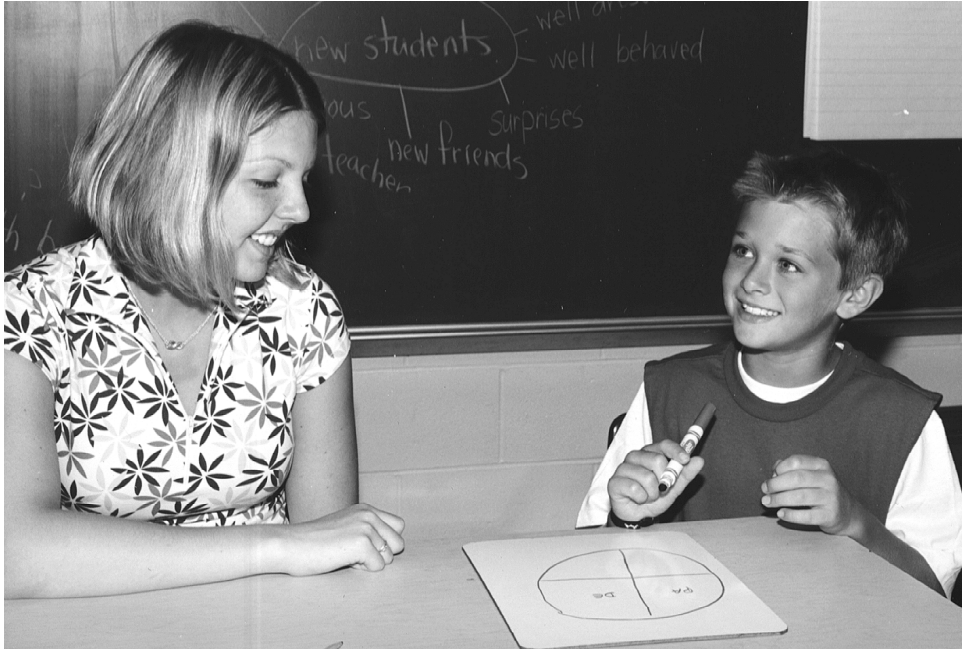
Vocabulary breadth and depth develop rapidly from the early years through adulthood. Children expand their vocabulary at the rate of about three thousand words per year, which equates, on average, to about eight new words each day (Beck and McKeown 1991; Nagy and Herman 1987; Nagy, Herman, and Anderson 1985; Shu, Anderson, and Zhang 1995). This phenomenal growth arises from the social use of language, formal and informal, with both peers and adults (Vygotsky 1986). Additional factors, equally important, are the child’s intellectual curiosity and general maturation (Piaget 1967). Prior to learning to read, children integrate new words into their bank of known words as they engage in authentic communication.

Vocabulary has long been recognized as critical to successful reading comprehension (Anderson and Freebody 1981; Davis 1968). While children are learning to read, they gather additional experiential information simply by living, interacting with others, and encountering the various media. This information broadens their thinking and gives them the tools—words—to express novel semantic and conceptual relationships. There exists, then, an ever-evolving recursive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Graves 1987; Kibby 1995; Scott and Nagy 1997; Vacca and Vacca 1999). It’s also a chicken-egg proposition: does wide reading produce a strong vocabulary, or does someone with a strong vocabulary read widely?

One cautionary note before I discuss the problems with traditional methods of vocabulary teaching. When I talk about “less than best” practice, my intention is not to demean anyone but simply to examine our practices in light of what serves kids’ needs best. I hold myself up as an imperfect mentor—until I read the literature and reflected on my practice, I was guilty of doing what had been done to me as a student!

Traditional Vocabulary Instruction

For too many teachers, vocabulary instruction is like spelling instruction: they know they ought to be doing it, but they don’t generally know much about how. So they *assign* it rather than *teach* it, falling back on how their teachers taught. Traditional vocabulary instruction is built on shifting sand: the assumption is that knowing a definition is the same thing as thoroughly and flexibly knowing a word’s meaning. The problem is often exacerbated by the misuse of the dictionary: it is *not* a stand-alone source of word meanings isolated from a comprehensible context.



Vocabulary Exercises

Here's the way the use of vocabulary exercises typically unfolds. On Monday, the teacher gives students a fixed number of vocabulary words, usually twenty, possibly related to some unit of study, possibly not, sometimes with teacher-supplied definitions, sometimes with instructions for students to look up the definitions in a dictionary; during the week, students memorize the definitions of the words, possibly using them in original sentences; on Friday, the teacher gives a test on the targeted words; by Friday afternoon the students have already forgotten the words. Some teachers allow students to choose words they don't know—but then the students, especially the struggling readers, get discouraged by their long lists of unknown words, stop being honest, and don't identify any words at all.

The methods above, as well as their hybrids and adaptations, are quite labor intensive for teachers, particularly in light of the lack of results. So, many teachers decide (or their administration decides for them!) that vocabulary workbooks are the answer. They are teacher proof, easy to use, and consistent. Students don't have to copy words off the blackboard, and teachers don't have to think about what words to select: they're there, neatly printed in columns, accompanied by single, short definitions and followed by various exercises. (These exercises are usually keyed to standardized tests, so that the preselected words match their

preselected definitions with little muss and fuss. Unfortunately, words in the real world are often messy and have lots of gray areas: life is not multiple choice.) Students do the exercises (synonyms, antonyms, etc.) in preparation for Friday's test, again forgetting the words by Friday afternoon, but ready to start a new cycle of words the following Monday. This requires a lot of work by the students (imagine figuring out assuage, androgynous, and avoirdupois when you can't even pronounce them, let alone tie them to your experience), but not nearly as much work by the teacher. Yet any teacher who has "taught" this way knows how dreary and stultifying it is!

Nevertheless, more and more school districts, probably responding to the pressure of high-stakes testing, are buying vocabulary packages and programs to ensure consistency and articulation rather than investing in professional development and deeper understanding of how best to teach meaningful vocabulary. The reality behind the newfound interest in vocabulary testing is that consumers are largely paying for articulated, consistent expenditures of invaluable teaching time. In all likelihood, the true consistency is that students are summarily forgetting shallowly "learned" definitions. Consistency can be bought and mandated; true learning is more elusive.

Context

Another traditional tactic—context clues—holds more promise but has also traditionally been misused. It's akin to telling the child at the decoding level to "sound it out"—they would if they could. It's not particularly useful to tell kids to "use context clues to figure it out"; they need to be shown how, and teachers need to recognize the complexity of using the context.

Take this passage, from Jostien Gaarder's *The Solitaire Mystery* (1996): "I was a sailor on a Spanish brig on its way from Veracruz in Mexico to Cadiz in April. We were sailing with a large cargo of silver." A skilled reader who has never seen or heard the word *brig* before can readily infer that a brig is a type of ship. Nevertheless, this single exposure to the word does not result in a very rich or lasting understanding of it. I thought that the brig was the part of a ship, below the deck, where the captain stuck crew members for punishment. I'd better go check. I put down my cup of coffee and shuffle off to the other room to get the dictionary. Yup, the word is listed twice: "A two-masted sailing ship, square-rigged on both masts [short for brigantine]; also a ship's prison." For me, some previous familiarity with the word, plus context, plus the dictionary, plus a semiauthentic purpose, results in richer understanding.

Now let's take another passage from the same novel: "Being hereditarily tainted, I sometimes tried to take part in Dad's philosophical discussions, which arose just about every time he wasn't talking about Mommy." Assume we tell typical eighth graders to figure out the meaning of two unknowns, *hereditarily* and *tainted*, by

using the context and relating it to their experience. It's often just too much! Kids need to be reading books that are appropriately challenging, and they need to be taught to read the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines.

There is no question that learning from context is an important avenue of vocabulary growth and that it deserves attention and practice in the classroom. Remember, a student learns three thousand new words a year. According to Adams (1990), only about three hundred of these are learned by direct instruction, which leaves a whopping 2,700 that, by default, are largely learned naturally, via context and wide reading. But context as an instructional method by itself is ineffective and very inefficient as a means of teaching new meanings. The context may appear quite helpful if one already knows what a word means, but it seldom supplies adequate information for a person who has no other knowledge about the meaning of the word. Consider the following sentence used to illustrate context clues involving contrast: "Although Melissa was very comely, her roommate was grotesque." The word *although* signals that contrast is involved, but the exact nature of the contrast is clear only to someone who knows the definition of both *comely* and *grotesque*. The problem becomes obvious when one substitutes other words into the sentence—*tall, short; smart, stupid; loud, quiet*. And the use of contrast is a relatively informative type of context clue!

The astute teacher must face up to this dilemma: most contexts in normal text are relatively uninformative. The context around any unfamiliar word tells us something about its meaning, but seldom does any single context give complete information. Nagy et al. (1985) found that students who read grade-level texts under natural conditions have between a 5 and 20 percent chance of learning meaning from a single exposure. Further, if average fifth graders spend about twenty-five minutes a day reading, they encounter about twenty thousand unfamiliar words. If the aforementioned 5 percent, or one twentieth, of those words can be figured out from context, a child learns about a thousand new words from that strategy. In fact, Anderson et al. (1985) found that the amount of time spent reading was the best predictor of vocabulary growth.

So I am certainly not advocating that we abandon the use of context; rather we need to use instructional strategies that actively teach the use of context clues and increase the amount of time that students spend reading.

Definitions

Teachers are often frustrated when they ask students to use dictionaries to demonstrate that they have learned word meanings. And children are frustrated when they look up a new word and—even if they can find it readily—are then often faced with a bewildering array of definitions to choose from, many of them possibly quite befuddling. Put yourself in the shoes of an average fourth grader

who is looking up *sinister* and finds “presaging trouble; ominous.” Huh? How about a sixth grader who looks up *propaganda* and finds “material disseminated by the proselytizers of a doctrine”? Is the typical eleven-year-old patient enough to then look up *proselytizers* and extrapolate what’s germane from *proselytize*, a verb that means to “convert from one doctrine to another”? And then there’s the word *doctrine*. . . .

If a word is important to know, I would overlap an *illustration* with a *definition* with an *oxymoron* with a *hinky-pinky* with a *riddle* if I truly wanted a child to retain the meaning. This may seem like overkill, but the overlapping strategies complement one another, thereby increasing the possibility that a child will retain the word’s meaning. Let’s apply my process to *sinister*:

- A simpler definition than “presaging trouble; ominous,” such as “evil.”
- A riddle/hinky-pinky: What do you call an evil preacher? A sinister minister.
- A sketch:

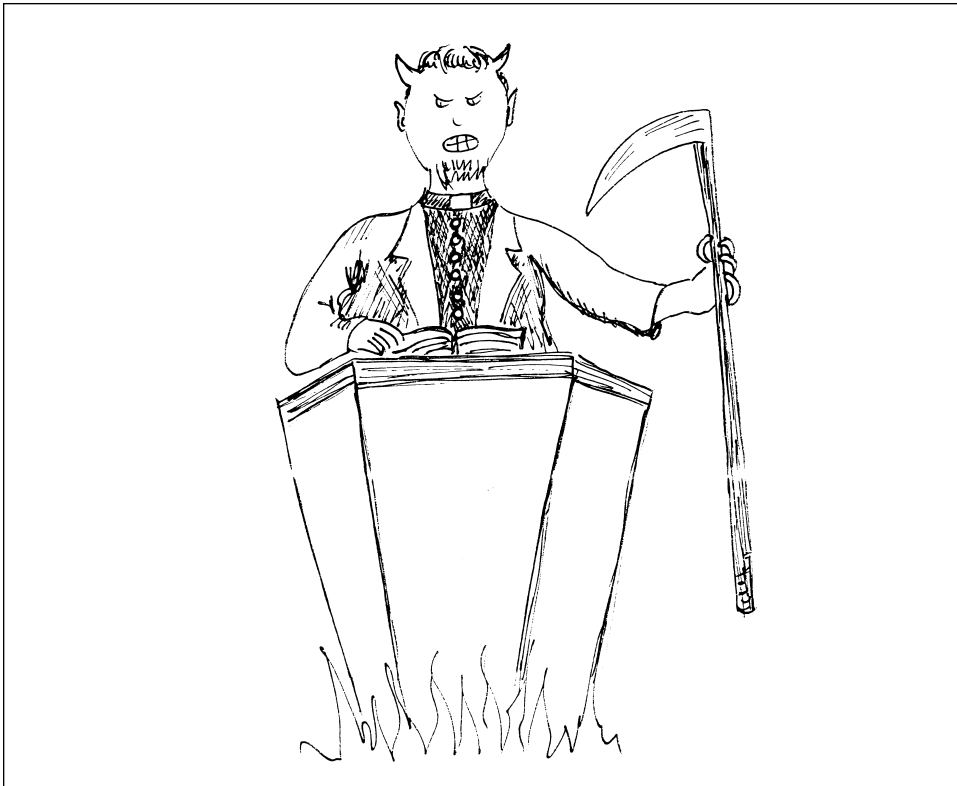


Figure 1–1. Sinister Minister

- Quick anecdotes that enhance the learning of the word, coupled with examples.

In traditional “look it up, define it, use it in a sentence” assignments, the kids write down a definition, usually the shortest one they can find, and they have learned to provide a generic sentence, because specific sentences can lead to trouble. So if the word to be looked up is *balmy* and the child uses/chooses “mild and pleasant,” she might write “I saw a balmy man” in an effort to avoid the specificity of “Marie, who didn’t like her food too hot, ordered a balmy sauce for her spaghetti.” Either way, the nuances of a rich word are not truly absorbed.

Do children actually learn more about word meanings by choosing among definitions for novel words? I doubt it. Learning a definition is sometimes a good way to learn a word’s meaning, but there needs to be more.

All Is Not Lost

The good news, now that we know what not to do, is that there are a variety of rich, deep vocabulary learning strategies out there, all of them rooted in making students active agents in their learning. Beck and McKeown (2003) find a silver lining in the news that despite the proliferation of less-than-enlightened practices, so many of our children still manage to learn so many words. It doesn’t take rocket science. We also know that students are exposed to an incredible variety of words in classrooms whose teachers provide diverse and rich choices for daily read-alouds and shared readings. And of course, independent reading and the talk that bubbles up around students’ reading and writing (Ralph Fletcher likens it to “floating on a sea of talk”) dramatically increases their word knowledge. So let’s get away from what doesn’t work and move on to what does!

Index

- abstract words, 77–78
- acronyms, 122
- acrostics, 81–82
- aesthetic reading, 30
- affixes, 89, 91–93, 94, 96
- alliteration, 127
- alphabetizing, 106
- ambiguous words, 78–79
- anagrams, 134
- analogies, 58–60, 61, 153, 157–58
- analytical scoring, 86
- anecdotal notes, 148
- anecdotes, 7, 11
- antonyms, 177–78
- appositives, 34
- assessment, 13, 136–48

- basal series, 30
- Beowulf*, 127
- bookmarks, vocabulary, 39, 40
- Brigance Diagnostic
 - Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills, 140

- capitonyms, 128
- Capote, Truman, 74
- Caudrey, Robert, 103
- character maps, 42–43
- classifying process, 22
- clichés, 80, 85, 179
- clipped words, 120–21
- cloze procedures, 36–38, 66
- collocative contexts, 23
- Compound It, 97
- compound words, 89–90, 94
- comprehension vocabulary, 22
- concept circles, 44–45
- concrete words, 77–78
- confused words, 173–74
- context clues, 32–38
 - cloze procedure and, 35, 36–38
 - collocative, 23
 - contextual redefinition strategy, 69
 - contrast, 69
 - definition, 68
 - description, 68
 - in guided reading sessions, 32–33
 - inexactness of, 4–5, 16
 - intelligent guess strategy, 70
 - pragmatic, 23
 - problem-solving stages, 33–34
 - semantic, 23
 - strategies, 38–51
 - structural analysis and, 90–91
 - syntactic, 23–24
 - TOAST strategy, 69
 - types of, 34, 68–69
 - using, 10–11, 15, 34–36, 67
- context puzzles, 66
- contextual redefinition, 69
- contrast context clues, 69
- conversation corner, 26
- conversations, 20, 21, 26
- corruptions, 115
- C(2)QU strategy, 51
- criterion-referenced tests, 138
- crossword puzzles, 116, 117

- debates, 27
- definition context clues, 68
- definition mapping, 104–5
- definitions, 15, 46, 60–70, 64
- “degree” synonyms, 175–76
- description context clues, 68
- dictionaries, 100–108
 - history of, 102–3
 - types of, 103
 - using, 2, 5–7, 10–11, 69, 104–8
- Dictionary game, 107
- directive words, 73
- discussion characteristics, 26
- Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty, 140

- efferent reading, 30
- emotive words, 73
- environmental print, 11
- Epictetus, 88
- eponymous words, 114
- etymology, 96–97
- explicit words, 78–79

- “Face in the Pool, The: The Story of Echo and Narcissus” (Osborne), 47–48
- Find the Country activity, 191
- foreign words and phrases, 184
- formal words, 79
- formative assessments, 136, 142–48
- Foxfire, 27
- Fruyer Model, 55–56
- Fritz, Jean, 32

- Gaarder, Jostien, 4
- general words, 78
- gist, 34
- glossaries, 108
- graffiti boards, 11
- graphic organizers, 15, 42–48, 62–63, 142
- Greek root words, 193–94
- group discussion, 26
- Guess my word activity, 82–83
- guided reading, 32–33
- Gwynne, Fred, 111

- Hemingway, Ernest, 72
- heteronyms, 166–72
- hinky/pinkies, 6, 119–20, 133
- holistic scoring, 86
- homographs, 100, 102, 123–24, 166–72
- homophones, 123–24, 159–65
- How well do I know? activity, 81

- idiomatic expressions, 181
- idioms, 112, 113
- illustrated words and phrases, 128–29
- illustrations, 6, 14, 82, 115–16
- imagining, 25–26
- imponderables, 134–35
- independence, continuum of, 9
- Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs), 141
- informal words, 79
- informational texts, 30
- informing activities, 28
- initialisms, 122–23
- intelligent guess strategy, 70
- International Reading Association, 18
- interpersonal words, 73
- interviewing, 26–27
- invented words, 128–29
- IT FITS strategy, 67

- jargon, 80, 85
- Johnson, Samuel, 102
- Julie of the Wolves* (George), 29
- knowledge rating strategy, 49–50
- K-W-L procedure, vocabulary-
focused, 65–66
- Latin root words, 193–94
- learning
 - incidental, 17–19
 - new words, 22–23
 - personalizing, 14
 - responsibility for own, 9–10
- literature-based vocabulary
 - instruction, 30–31
- logographs, 41–42
- malapropisms, 115
- mapping strategies, 42–48, 144
- maze cloze, 37–38
- mental lexicons, 23–24
- metaphors, 125–26, 180
- Michener, James, 74
- mnemonics, 14
- morphemes, 89–93
- motivation, 13, 109
- My Brother Sam is Dead* (Collier
and Collier), 1
- mythology, 86, 96–97, 114
- naming process, 22
- narrative texts, 30
- National Football League Teams
 - activity, 127–28, 190
- National Reading Panel, 15
- neologisms, 128–29
- New York Public Library Writer's
Guide to Style and
Usage*, 76
- nonstandard words, 152
- norm-referenced tests, 138
- number riddles, 127, 188–89
- one-letter magic activity, 131
- onomatopoeia, 128
- OPIN (opinion) strategy, 64–65
- oracy, 21
- oral cloze, 37
- oral histories, 26–27
- oral language
 - active listening, 20
 - continuum of “knowing” a
word and, 75–76
 - conversing and discussing, 26
 - development of, 24–28
 - imagining, 25–26
 - informing, 28
 - oral histories, 26–27
 - persuasion, 27–28
 - thinking before speaking, 20
 - vocabulary and, 20–28
- “Our Incredible Language,” 154
- overwriting, 85
- Oxford English Dictionary*, 103–4
- oxymorons, 127
- palindromes, 112–13
- panel discussion, 26
- paranomasia, 132–33
- “passage critical” words, 53
- Password, 24
- PAVE, 107, 108
- Peabody Picture Vocabulary
Test, 141
- personalized learning, 14
- persuasion, 27–28
- Plimpton, George, 74
- portfolio self-evaluation, 148
- portmanteau words, 111,
121–22
- pragmatic contexts, 23
- prefixes, 89, 91–92, 95, 96
- primary trait scoring, 86
- production vocabulary, 22
- Progression Toward Independent
Learning continuum, 9
- propaganda devices, 27–28
- proverbs, 182–83
- pseudonyms, 127
- puns, 110–12
- puzzles, 116–18
- questions activity, 13–14
- quickstorms activity, 134
- quotations, about writing, 192
- reading
 - aloud, 18–19
 - providing time for, 12
- vocabulary development and,
2, 5, 12, 53, 54
- rearranging, 74
- record keeping, 148
- reducing, 74
- reference tools, 100–108
- referential words, 73
- relating process, 22
- revision, 74
- rewording, 74
- riddles, 6, 127–29, 188–89
- root words, 43–44, 89, 91, 96,
193–94
- Ruark, Robert, 74
- rubrics, 85–86
- SAT tests, 141
- scribing words, 115–16
- secret vocabulary, 72
- self-evaluation, by students,
146–48, 148
- semantic contexts, 23
- semantic feature analysis
(SFA), 56–57
- semantic gradients, 57–58, 84
- sentence game, 50
- Shazam!, 51
- signal words and phrases, 34,
185–87
- similes, 125–26, 179
- Smith, Red, 72
- sniglets, 128–29
- Solitaire Mystery, The*
(Gaarder), 4–5
- “sophisticated words,” 18
- special-needs diagnosis, 141–43
- specific words, 78
- spell-checking programs, 100–101
- spelling, 94–96
- spoonerisms, 115
- standardized tests
 - assessment and, 136–37
 - measurement difficulties, 138–39
 - specialized, 140–41
 - vocabulary exercises and, 3–4
- Stanford Diagnostic Reading
Tests, 141
- stop and jot activity, 83
- story impressions strategy, 48–49
- storytelling, 25–26

- structural analysis, 88–99
- “structure” words, in cloze
 - activities, 36
- student self-evaluation, 146–48
- suffixes, 89, 92–93, 96
- summative assessment, 13, 136–37
- sustained silent reading (SSR), 12
- syllabication rules, 93–94
- synonym cloze, 38
- synonym game, 87
- synonyms, 34, 175–76
 - thesauruses and, 73–74
- synonym seizure, 128
- syntactic contexts, 23–24

- teachable moments, 13
- teacher-constructed tests, 145–46
- “teacher-proof” manuals, 30
- technical meanings, for known words, 64
- technical texts, 30
- Tell me how activity, 130–31
- “text talks,” 18–19
- thematic “barbarianisms,” 133–34
- thesauruses, 73–74, 84, 85
- thinking, before speaking, 20
- thinking aloud, 12, 29, 34, 35–36
- three-minute meetings, 144
- time-cost relationship, 18, 19
- TOAST, 69
- Tom Swifities, 84, 110–11
- Triple Threat, 97
- TV commercials, 27–28
- two-way words, 130–31
- typical-to-technical meaning strategy, 64

- vocab-o-gram, 46–48
- vocabulary
 - creating opportunities to use new words, 16
 - learning from oral contexts, 21
 - learning process, 22–23
 - modes of meaning, 73
 - nonstandard words, 152
 - usable words, 15–16
 - using words in a sentence, 7
- vocabulary assessment, 136–48
- vocabulary-audience match, 85
- vocabulary bookmarks, 39, 40
- vocabulary cards, 8
- vocabulary collection frame, 80
- vocabulary development
 - of children entering kindergarten, 20–21
 - from context clues, 4–5
 - “knowing” a word, 13, 54, 75–76
 - number of words, 20–21, 21, 23
 - rate of, 2
 - reading and, 2, 5, 12, 53, 54
 - using vocabulary exercises, 3–4
- vocabulary-focused K-W-L procedure, 65–66
- vocabulary instruction
 - curriculum and, 52–70
 - direct, 53–70
 - explicit, 17–19
 - ineffective, 1–7
 - literature instruction and, 29–51
 - principles of, 8–19
 - problems with exercises, 3–4
 - traditional, problems with, 2–7
 - writing and, 71–87
- vocabulary lists, student-selected, 38–41
- vocabulary notebooks, 66–67
- vocabulary records, 148
- vocabulary self-collection strategy (VSS), 38–41
- Vocabulary Squares, 97–99
- vocabulary tests
 - formative assessments, 142–48
 - preparation for, 140
 - specialized, 140–41
- vocabulary trees, 43–44
- vocabulary workbooks, 3–4
- VSS (vocabulary self-collection strategy), 38–41

- Websites, 155–56
- Webster, Noah, 103
- What’s the Big Idea*, Ben Franklin? (Fritz), 32–33
- Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests, 141
- word analogies, 58–60, 61
- word blends, 121–22
- word cards, 14, 41–42, 148
- word choice, for writing, 76–83
- word games, 97–99
- wordiness, 87
- Word keeps changing activity, 83
- word maps, 46, 47, 144
- word notebooks, 148
- word-of-the-day calendars, 84
- word parts, 88–99
- word play, 109–35. See also games
- word-rich environments, 11–12
- word search puzzles, 116, 118
- word sketching/illustrating activity, 82
- writer’s notebooks, 80, 83–84
- writing
 - quotations about, 192
 - revision, 74
 - vocabulary instruction and, 71–87
 - word choice for, 76–83
- writing process, 74
- writing vocabulary
 - encouraging expressive word choices, 84
 - modes of meaning, 73
 - mythology, 86
 - revision and, 73–74
 - strategies for older children, 83–86
 - strategies for younger children, 80–83
 - thesauruses and, 73–74
 - word choice, 76–80
 - word knowledge, 75–76

- Yea/Nay game, 145
- “Young Percival” (Hunter), 49
- zip cloze, 37